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ESSAYS ON THE DRAMA.*

DRAMATIC Art is not only declining, but we may look upon it as extinct. To the past belongs its glory, and to the present that veneration for it to which every beautiful creation of genius is so justly entitled. Those who love the stage as well as those who hate it, all bear testimony to its fallen condition, and to the impossibility of its resurrection under existing circumstances. Men of ability no longer look upon it as a suitable outlet for their talents, nor do the public look to the stage any more for a serious and matured expression of the times. It is in a measure the domain of charlatanism, or an instrument for mere money-making enterprises. The curtain has fallen upon that made eternally memorable by the genius of Shakespeare, and centuries may roll by before it rises again, if that should ever be. Can any reason be assigned for this clearly within the comprehension of men? Let us see.

The times of Pericles, Elizabeth, Louis XIV., and Philip, are generally regarded as the four great dramatic eras of the world. The national manners and feelings out of which the drama grows, had, during these periods, a freshness, an originality and power peculiar to themselves. They gave rise to high action, lofty character, and fiery passions; they emitted fires from the human soul which were easily fused into dramatic poetry. Men felt, and panted under the great events which were passing around them. They looked away from the narrow horizon of their own petty personal schemes, and felt as if they had an ancestry to honor and emulate, and a posterity to enrich with their own noble examples and inimitable self-sacrifices. Dramatic art, as all art, must be born in the soul of genius, through the worthy and becoming reflection of outward phenomena. Those two factors being given in suitable relationship, and art must be the inevitable result. The introduction of the melodrama in 1800, by La Chausse, was the first unmistakable symptom of the decline of dramatic art. Then was to be seen the bastard usurping the place of the legitimate offspring; then was to be seen the sceptre trembling in the hand that had once wielded it with universal sway, and the shadow of death crept over expiring life.

The extinction of dramatic Art is not astonishing, if we note the total absence of that from which alone it can draw any nourishment. What is our present individual and social condition, and what are its capabilities to awaken the muse of dramatic Art from its slumber? We shall see.

With us, now, religion is the pale ghost of conventionality, the haggard goddess of-fashionable worship. The preacher and the congregation contract together in a commercial way. Fifty-two sermons are to be delivered for so many dollars; and both the tone of the preacher, the thread of his discourse, and the listening listlessness of the congregation declare the base metallic bond

that unites them. The religion that once cradled dramatic art into life is to be seen no more in the austere angust depth of its sincerity, or in its intense power over the heart. The souls of men reflect no more the glories of the heavens, but are the poor shrivelled cesspools through which are filtered the low passions and base appetites of drivelling worldlings. Hypocrisy, in gilded ermine, sits enthroned in pious trappings, and holds up the monuments of her earthly success in vindication of her rights. The lowly good and the humble in spirit—the real disciples of Christ, are looked upon as wayfaring mendicants, whose degraded position proclaims the heterodoxy of their belief. The El Dorado of this money-getting period of the world's history is the only heaven you can safely aspire to, if you would avoid the miseries of *honest poverty*, and circulate like a comet through the social firmament.

The mighty spirit of the battle-field, where right grappled in deadly conflict with might, is likewise extinct, and with it the poetry, the music, and the bold magnanimity of soul to which it gave rise. Diplomacy, the material god of mental cunning and subterfuge, the subtle magician of hypocrisy and deceit, stands erect in the midst of nations, and a fallen nobility bows down in idolatry before it, while the growing honesty of a neglected people forebodes in shadowy outline the coming destruction of such a cursed idol.

If such be the changes that have darkened over the world, why should we wonder if the dramatic muse is silent—if she has withdrawn from the world, and is patiently waiting the dawn of a new order of things. If every individual be now but a mere mechanical expression of the dull routine of industrial and commercial life—if all the powers of life are pared down to a death-like monotony, and if to have one individual to be the mere echo, the mere counterpart of another, is the ruling voice of public opinion, and the highest point to which our education reaches—can we expect any fresh and glowing outpourings from the great reservoir of dramatic art—can we expect the poetic mirror to reflect that which does not exist? Though we may admit that the world's phenomena are under the dominion of law—though we may be fully conscious of their progressive continuity, yet if we look through material cosmical changes into the moral changes of social and individual life, we are greatly puzzled to give a satisfactory explanation of the trembling links that connect together the different historical stages in the life of man on this planet—how the different periods of growth blend into each other in varying progressive expressions, and how through dim and apparently stagnant interregnums the light of civilization is prolonged in increasing volumes. Can we tell out of what social complications Aeschylus created his Prometheus, Goethe his melancholy Werther, Cervantes his maladive Quixote, and Shakespeare his sombre and moody Hamlet. The creation of Werther is instinct with a new transitional period in literary life. It is a stepping-stone between the middle-age and our modern times, and placed an end to

* Essays on the Drama. By W. B. DONNE. London, 1858.

that form of thought which was peculiar to the palmy days of aristocracy and chivalry. Werther, though a true type of our nature, cannot be considered unchangeably so ; as a poetic creation, he died young, with a juvenile smile upon his melancholy face : was he not in this respect the true embodiment of the social phase of his own period. Though a child of the people, a souvenir of their humility, yet he was not cast in the low, scheming, cunning mould of later days, when the stench of the shop is too strong for the perfume of a poetic soul. To Werther and Charlotte must ever cling pleasant though melancholy memories, and in their strange history shall we always find many fragments of our own.

Would you comprehend the true social nature of Spain in the sixteenth century, you must catch the genius of Cervantes as it is reflected in the immortal creations of his own brain. We have biographies of the Duke of Albe and of Philip the Second, but out of these you can no more draw the true spirit of their times, than you could the beauty of the Coliseum by contemplating one of its fragments. Cervantes travelled and observed, saw life in nearly all its varying expressions, and with a capacious soul, born for the purpose, he mirrored forth in breadth and truth of outline, the ever memorable social conditions of the age in which he lived. His age made him an artist, and true to his vocation, that age will ever socially live in the undying creations of his genius. He alone has written its true history, which is surely destined to survive all changes. In the work of Cervantes we see a strange interfusion of merriment and sadness—we see the Spanish soul, as it was at that time, wrapped in emblems of its own follies and chimeras. Cervantes was a patriot, a Spaniard at heart, and he wept sentences of tears over the deplorable state of his own loved country.

In the Hamlet of our own Shakspeare, however, are concentrated the highest poetical elements that society or man has ever generated—it is the solemn spiritual procession of life itself in its most sublime aspects. There is not a thread in the whole web of our being that is not reflected in brilliant colors through the burningly convulsed heart of the poet. The restless impassioned soul of Hamlet beats violently against the pitiless chains that limit its upward flights. The biting, bitter northern blasts and storms of outward nature are made, through geographical position, to harmonize with the deeply dark pulsations of Hamlet's soul. The floating moral elements of society are seen in terrible conflict, and the mighty spirit of man chafes against the not less mighty potencies with which he is surrounded. Historically considered, Hamlet lies between the twilight of the middle age and the dawn of modern times ; he is the moral embodiment of both. To this he adds a teutonic seriousness of soul, a subtle analysis of consciousness, and an immutable love of truth. He comprehended the moral nature of the affections too well to suppose them equally co-existent with the passions—he thought a thing of purity once loved ought to be loved for ever ; hence he thought

the sacred memory of his father had too quickly departed from his mother's soul, and that her heart had hardened too soon to have ever been the seat of much tender affection. The Hamlet of Shakspeare, the Alceste of Molière, and the Werther of Goethe, are the highest and noblest creations of the modern mind, and indicate its last point of dramatic perfection, until we shall have a newly-created social life.

The creation of the drama in Greece is due to Æschylus, in England to Marlowe, in France to Corneille, and in Spain to Torres de Naharro and Cervantes. It would be curious to compare together the fruits of these authors' genius in connection with the social physiognomy of their respective ages. It would be equally curious to trace the manner in which the successors of each carried the dramatic art, once commenced, to comparative perfection, and how from this point it gradually declined. It has been well observed that, "in Greece, the three epochs of dramatic formation, perfection, and decline, are felicitously represented by the only three remaining tragedians, Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides ; in France equally so, by Corneille, Racine, and Voltaire ; in England less perfectly, by Marlowe, Shakspeare, and Fletcher ; in Spain still less so, by Cervantes, Lope de Vega, or Calderon, and Moreto. With the exception of the Spanish writers, the progress was in all these poets the same in kind, as also was the decline. . . . In Sophocles, Shakspeare, and Racine, the sternness, ruggedness, grandeur, bombast, triviality, and scanty outlines of their predecessors were replaced by beauty and harmonious completeness. They received a cyclopean fragment, bold, but unshapely ; in their hands it became a Phidian statue, the ideal of harmonious proportion. The Titan became a man. Art gained in depth what it lost in terror. The Titan, no doubt, was a grand, daring being, vast in size, indomitable in will ; but, compared to man, wondrous in intelligence, inexhaustible in affection, this Titan was insignificant."

The Essays before us of Mr. Donne, and which have given rise to our own remarks, are worthy the attention of all lovers of the drama. Thoroughly versed in the subject, the master of a free and flowing style, and a man of independent thought, all he says is in perfect keeping with a genial love of the drama, and a keen knowledge of its artistic nature. He treats principally of the English drama, of its declining condition, and the actors and actresses of the English stage. His essays are both instructive and entertaining, and embody the best English views of the subject. In his essay on the Athenian comedy we find the following passage:

"To our apprehension, the history of wars and treaties "is often tedious and uninstructive, representing one phase "only, and that among the most uniform of the human "species. Much more interesting and instructive is it to "trace the identity of man under the thin disguises of "manners and costumes ; to discern under the tunic and "the toga the passions, follies, and virtues which still

"actuate Mayfair and Whitechapel ; and to discover that "the distinction between Christian and pagan life consists "rather in the development of man's moral and intellectual "nature than in the superficial and accidental aspect of "new creeds and new forms of society."

From the *Essay on Songs from the Dramatists*, we give an extract not very complimentary to our present race of book-makers.

"The popularization of literature has been accompanied "by evil results as well as good. The number of readers "has infinitely increased ; but the quality of literature has "almost in equal measure been deteriorated. With a few "honorable and striking exceptions, few recent authors "exhibit any masculine strength or idiomatic raciness of "language ; as few books display any depth of learning "or originality of thought. The people like easy reading, "and there is a superfetation of it. We have abundance "of pungent sauces, but little strong meat to eat with "them. We have a plenteous crop of literary gossip ; but "the garners in which our elder and manlier literature is "stored, are seldom opened. Our great writers are talked "about, not read."

THE FATE OF THE PARTHENON.

(Translated for THE CRAYON from ADOLF STAHL'S "TORSO.")

The gloom which the death of Pericles and Phidias cast over Greece may be likened to that darkness which attends upon an eclipse of the sun or the moon. The comprehensive mind of Pericles reflected the all-illuminating radiance of the mighty sun, and the poetic genius of Phidias the lovely brilliancy of the tender moon. Who can fathom the spiritual importance of beings in whom the divine element was so powerfully developed as it was in Pericles and Phidias ? Their works, indeed, proclaimed the triumphs of their intellects, but the magnetism of their presence, the quickening impulse of their conversation, the charm of their manners, the constant influence which they exercised through their inspiring personality—these were now gone forever; all the nobler minds of Hellas keenly felt the loss, and were plunged in grief and sorrow. As time rolled on, the sorrow became more intense, at least in the bosom of the thoughtful Grecian, who saw his beloved land gradually declining from that pinnacle of glory and art to which it had been raised by Pericles and Phidias. The one, indeed, had laid down principles of state, and the other principles of art, which mankind could not willingly let die, but it was with both as it was with the faith of Christ without the Master. Ideals had been brought forward to stimulate the highest progress of the race, but those in whom the ideal had been made flesh were gone. Athenian poets, scholars, and statesmen, as their thought dwelt upon the past, and conjured before their memory the august presence of their great ruler and great artist, could not fail to be overcome with sadness. Pericles was gone. Phidias was gone. The only solace left was in the wondrous structure

of the Parthenon, with others of the countless monuments of Athens that breathed the spirit of their genius.

From its soaring height the Parthenon looked down with the grandeur of a prophet, as if to proclaim to a bewildered world that the seeds sown by mighty minds were firmly rooted in the earth, as firmly as its own pillars upon the summit of its lofty rock. Five hundred years had passed away since the death of Phidias, and although all around it had crumbled into dust, the Parthenon still stood erect, as if to afford to Pausanias and Plutarch an opportunity to behold and to transmit to the most distant posterity an account of its splendor. But the noble temple was destined to fall. The seeds of beauty sown by its architect have indeed borne glorious fruit, but the grandest model of their genius is forever gone. The vestiges of its existence, however, are not entirely destroyed. The traveller of the present day still beholds upon the hallowed site a monumental pile of glittering marble. Beauty of form is still visible in the symmetrical proportion of its ruins. Even the most glowing imagination fails to reconcile the mind to the aspect of desolation which the Parthenon presents. The roofless pillars, bereft of their capitals, raise their heads despondingly toward the skies; the interior of the temple resembles a battle-field ; the most admirable fragments of art lie scattered about in gloomy, chaotic confusion, like the bloody remains of soldiers. Here behold an arm, there a neck, here a foot, there a leg—nothing complete ; all is broken, mutilated. The ornaments of the metopes have disappeared ; the splendid pediments have perished ; the ruins even of their beauteous groups of statuary have been remorselessly plundered, the rich images of the cella frieze have been destroyed, with scarcely an exception. One of the most recent explorers of the Parthenon * remarks, that the descriptive horrors of this St. Bartholomew's massacre of art may have haunted the mind for years and years, yet they are only fully revealed in the ghostly majesty of reality upon the spot itself, where the foul deed was perpetrated and beauty slaughtered. On beholding the grave of the Parthenon, the words of the German poet come into the mind :

"Das ist das Loos des Schönen auf der Erde."
"Such is the fate of the beautiful on earth."

But who was the author of this calamity ? Who was the destroyer of the Parthenon ? Was it Christianity ? No. Superstitious priests and priest-ridden laymen were indeed the ruthless murderers of many of the noblest monuments of antiquity. But the Parthenon they did not dare to touch. The holy Virgin, the mother of Christ, took peaceable possession of the hallowed abode of the virgin mother of Erichonius. The pagan temple became a Christian church. Remains of Byzantine church pictures are still visible in the interior of the Cella. The emperor Basilius, while on a triumphal tour through Greece (according to Cedrenus, the historian), after his victory over